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April 9, 1976

INTERAGENCY MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: ASAD'S DOMESTIC POSITION

Introduction

Two months ago, Syrian President Asad's prestige abroad and political strength at home appeared to have reached a new high as a result of ~~his~~ then successful mediation in Lebanon. Now, as his efforts there have come undone, Asad finds himself more vulnerable perhaps than at any time since he came to power five and a half years ago.

~~That he~~ ^{has} ~~has~~ risen ^{to} to his present position and ~~managed~~ ^{his staying power} to stay there for as long as he has--a modern record in Syria--testifies to ~~Asad's~~ ^{his} skill as a political infighter. As a minority Alawite president and a pragmatist who has strayed somewhat from Baathist orthodoxy, however, he has accumulated his share of enemies along the way.

Until now at least, his opponents have been too weak and divided to challenge him. As Syria has become increasingly bogged down ^{with} in Lebanon, however, there have been signs of growing opposition to Asad.

Ironically, his Lebanese policy has drawn fire from both conservative Sunni Muslims and left-wing Baathists ^{because} as he has been forced by circumstances to assume the unpopular role of protector of Lebanese Christians. But more impor-

tantly, his policy has encountered at least some resistance within the Syrian military, the mainstay of his regime.

Many Syrian military officers strongly sympathize with the Lebanese leftists and fear that ^{if Syria intervenes directly in Lebanon} they ~~will~~ ^{drawn} be sucked into an unwanted conflict with Israel over Lebanon.

Should Asad succeed in his present efforts to get Syrian mediation back on track in Lebanon, much of the ~~present~~ present opposition to him could quickly fade. By the same token, should he become more ~~deeply~~ ^{down} mired there and resort to more open intervention, the greater risk Asad is likely to run of weakening his domestic base and encouraging his enemies to move against him.

At present, we do not believe that Asad is in imminent danger of being overthrown. The chances for success of any would-be coup plotters appear ^{to be} far from certain. ~~[at best]~~ Much would depend on their ability to quickly neutralize the special security forces protecting the president--no easy task--and to win at least the tacit support of key military ~~and~~ commanders and intelligence officials, most of whom have been hand-picked by Asad.

In the past, this senior officer group--while ~~laced~~ laced with personal rivalries--has always strongly supported Asad, posing a formidable deterrant to any outside opponent. It probably still does. But what makes the present situation seem so ~~dangerous~~ dangerous for Asad are indications that disaffection

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with his leadership has spread to some elements of his inner circle of military supporters.

The Opposition

Syria has always been a notoriously difficult country to govern. Its history since independence has been punctuated by ~~one~~ coup or coup attempt ~~after another~~. Since coming to power in a bloodless coup of his own in 1970, President Asad has had to contend with opposition from a wide and disparate range of enemies, including conservative Sunni Muslims, disgruntled Baath party ideologues, and dissident members of his own Alawite Muslim sect. Most of these dissident groups have been too weak and divided to pose a serious threat to his regime and they probably still don't.

As Syria's first non-Sunni Muslim president, Asad has made a special effort to gain acceptance among the country's ~~pre-dominantly~~ ^{overwhelmingly} Sunni population. To placate the Sunni commercial class, he has modified some of his predecessor's more doctrinaire economic policies and recruited a team of technicians and economic planners from the educated Sunni elite that gives them a voice in determining government economic policy.

Many "safe" Sunnis also hold highly visible and ostensibly important posts in the government and ^{the} Syrian Baath party. Prime minister Ayyubi, foreign minister Khaddam, minister of defense Talas and chief of staff Shihabi, for example, are all Sunnis.

Nevertheless, the Sunnis remain ~~pretty much~~ cut off from the real ~~levels~~ of power and resentful of the domination exercised by Asad's small, schismatic, Alawite sect. Most Sunnis regard the Alawites as non-Muslims or heretics because their beliefs embrace some elements of Christianity and animism as well as Islam. The Sunnis also feel grossly underrepresented in Syria's ruling councils, especially in the military, which has been the real ~~ax~~ arbiter of Syrian politics since independence.

It is not surprising, then, that the fighting between Muslims and Christians in Lebanon has raised concern within the Asad government that the confessional strife ^{there} might spill over into Syria. Several weeks ago a regional security chief, an Alawite with close ties to the Asad family, was assassinated in Hamah apparently by members of the Muslim Brotherhood. Since then, there have been reports of other attacks on Alawites, possibly also by the brotherhood. The brotherhood--whose size is unknown--serves as the cutting edge of conservative Sunni opposition to the regime.

The government has moved quickly to clamp down on this kind of dissension in order to avoid a recurrence of the serious civil unrest the brotherhood instigated in several Syrian cities only a few years ago. Asad ordered a detachment of his brother Rifaat's "Defense Companies" to Hamah shortly after the murder there. These units, under the

command of one of Asad's uncles, reportedly rounded up several hundred people, including members of a number of locally prominent Sunni families, for interrogation. Syrian authorities have also warned Sunni religious leaders in Damascus and other major cities against stirring up trouble between the Sunni and Alawite communities.

More recently, police in Homs broke up a demonstration organized by the Muslim Brotherhood to protest Syria's involvement in Lebanon. The clash resulted in the death of one demonstrator and could spark further demonstrations and violence.

Closer to Home

Asad's cautious, relatively even-handed attempts ~~at~~ at resolving the Lebanese crisis have also drawn criticism from the Syrian military, the Baath party and the Alawite community. Many Syrians--whether they support Asad or not--~~support the~~ ^{sympathize with} the Lebanese Muslims and leftists and believe Asad's policy has favored the Christians.

His handling of the Lebanese problem, in fact, appears to have acted as a catalyst, raising the hopes of some of his most die-hard opponents that he will slip, offering them an opening they can exploit to bring him down. There are those doctrinaire Baathists, both within the Syrian Baath party and in exile, for example, who oppose Asad for

deviating from Baathist ideology and for relegating the party to a secondary role in policy-making.

Asad also has his enemies among the Alawites. This dissension is not new. Asad manipulated rivalries ~~wixkix~~ among various Alawite factions in the army and Baath party to take power. Asad and his brother Rifaat are also widely believed to have been responsible for the assassination in 1972 of Muhammad Umran, an influential leader of one Alawite group. Asad has carefully pruned the officer corps to get rid of supporters from rival Alawite factions, but some remain.

There are other groups, with some trouble-making potential, that might throw their support ^{behind} ~~as~~ an opposition bandwagon if they saw one developing, but they could not dislodge Asad themselves. The Syrian Communist party, for example, has recently encountered difficulties with the Asad regime. Although the Communists are ostensibly ~~A~~ junior partners in the ruling coalition, the government has placed travel restrictions on ^{their} ~~its~~ leaders and warned the party not ~~to try~~ to recruit members among students or the military, ~~which~~ which have traditionally been Baath party preserves. Moscow has said little about this and seems inclined to ignore the local communists' problems in the interests of maintaining good relations with Asad.

Most Serious Threat

The most serious opposition to Asad reportedly has surfaced among some of his senior military officers. His difficulties with one group, which is said to include the commanders of Syria's two armored divisions, began last fall when these officers banded together and demanded the recall of their units from near the Iraqi border. They had been sent there as part of a show of force at the height of the Euphrates water dispute with Iraq last spring.

[redacted] one of the leaders of this group is Brigadier General Tawfiq al-Juhni, ~~xxxxxx~~ the commander of the first armored division, now stationed near Damaasus. We know little about al-Juhni. He was one of Asad's strongest supporters in 1970. An Alawite, he is reputed to be a fanatical Baathist, "reckless," not particularly capable as a military officer, but popular with his troops.

Al-Juhni is also known [redacted] to have tangled with Asad's powerful and notoriously corrupt brother Rifaat, as have most of the members of this group. They^{all} apparently resent the power and wealth Rifaat has accumulated under Asad.

Rifaat, in fact, is widely disliked and considered by

many observers to be Asad's achilles heel. Despite some indications that he has reproved his brother for his behavior, Asad appears to trust Rifaat implicitly. His toleration of Rifaat's shady activities, including his alleged efforts to cut off arms to Lebanese leftists in January as a favor to one of his Lebanese business partners, Tony Franjiyah--President Franjiyah's son--is said to have further antagonized this group of officers.

Should some of Asad's senior commanders decide to move against him, they would obviously represent a dangerous threat. Together, they presently command some 35,000 troops with 500 tanks, most of them stationed in the ~~xx~~ vicinity of Damascus.

Asad is aware of this group's dissatisfaction, however, and presumably has taken precautions to keep their activities under close surveillance. We know he recently took additional security measures to guard against an assassination attempt--clearly the most difficult threat to defend against.

He reportedly has also warned some Baath party members to ~~xxxxxx~~ refrain from further criticism of his policy in Lebanon and dismissed and detained some senior ^{military} officers ^{for} opposing him. One of Rifaat's men is also said to have recently accused one of the al-Juhni group of treason at a party hosted by General al-Juhni. The accusation, supported by Rifaat who was present, ^{was also made privately} ~~would seem to have been intended as~~

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a warning.

External Subversion
~~EXTERNAL~~

The only other potentially serious threat to Asad may come from outside the country, from the Iraqis. The two rival Baath regimes have long been at odds and the dispute between them has become more open over the past year. The Iraqis have some assets within the Syrian Baath party, and doubtless within the military as well, that would be willing to support a coup attempt against Asad. Syrian authorities reportedly arrested several hundred pro-Iraqi Baath party members and some military officers a year ago, allegedly for plotting against the regime.

Baghdad also maintains ties with exiled Syrian Baathists in Beirut, including Salah Bitar, one of the founding fathers of the Baath party, who in turn maintain their own contacts inside Syria.

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We know little about either the Iraqis' or Bitar's activities inside Syria, but we believe that they could not pull off a coup against Asad without the support of powerful elements within the regime itself.

Asad's Strength

Balanced against whatever opposition presently exists are the still formidable forces Asad can count on to protect his government. Foremost of these are his brother Rifaat's Defense Companies, which number as high as 20,000 men and may have a few hundred tanks. Asad's nephew commands a rival praetorian guard of about 10,000 men. In addition, Asad runs an elaborate internal security network of intelligence agents and can probably count on the support of the Syrian air force--he is a former pilot--and the commanders of at least some of Syria's three infantry battalions.

Asad, moreover, is a skilled political operator who would be difficult for even the most determined opponents to outmaneuver. In obtaining prior Baath party approval for the government's statement on Lebanon, issued last week, Asad has adeptly maneuvered the party into

publicly supporting his policies in Lebanon and implicitly

condemning the Lebanese leftists for perpetuating the fighting and undermining Syrian mediation efforts. His continued introduction of Syrian regulars into Lebanon, ~~piece-meal~~, and recent ~~naval~~ blockage also seem carefully calculated to tighten his grip over the leftists and Palestinians in Lebanon without provoking the kind of opposition from his senior military commanders that ~~large-scale~~ open intervention in ~~strength~~ might trigger. We would expect him to continue to pursue this cautious tactic to avoid jeopardizing his position at home.

UN Mandate

As a result of his present preoccupation with Lebanon, Asad has probably shelved any decision on the UN mandate renewal question for the time being. The Syrians had earlier indicated they were considering taking the Palestinian issue back to the UN security council before the mandate expires at the end of May. If they could not obtain any satisfaction there, they said they would be tempted to turn to the general assembly for a "uniting for peace resolution."

The uniting for peace formula has been used twice in UN history--first during the Korean war and second in 1956 to condemn Soviet intervention in Hungary--as a means of circumventing a deadlock in the security council.

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At least one of the things the Syrian experience in Lebanon suggests thus far is that neither Asad nor his senior military officers are anxious to tangle again with the Israelis ~~at present~~. Syrian officials must know that a uniting for peace resolution would have no ~~practice~~^{practical} effect on peace negotiations and probably see it primarily as a face-saving device for getting them past yet another mandate deadline. Should Asad decide to do so, he could probably easily plead his preoccupation with Lebanon as an excuse to renew the mandate without comment.

It can be plausibly argued, however, that Asad will try to recoup some of ~~his~~ the prestige he has lost in Lebanon by demanding some concession in exchange for agreeing to another renewal of the mandate. Whether he tries to extract some concession or not, we doubt that he would go so far as to allow the mandate to lapse, ^{especially} if the situation ~~is~~ ^{is still} as ~~precarious~~^{uncertain} in Lebanon in May as it is now.